

LEICESTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 200 YEARS OF HISTORY

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For over 200 years the history of this Church and Leicester have been intertwined. Therefore, we must start at the beginning.

In the early history of New York State the lands west of the Genesee River were wilderness inhabited only by Native American tribes. There were four Seneca villages located in Leicester; Little Beard's Town, Squakie Hill, Gibsonville, and located at the Village of Leicester. The largest Village was Little Beard's Town and with the exception of Seneca fields, the area was forested and home to bear, wolves, and wildcats. One of the earliest settlers delighted in telling how He hunted bear and deer where the Village of Leicester now stands. Early Town records stated that there was a \$5.00 bounty for every wolf killed and \$1.00 for each wildcat.

During the Revolutionary War the Patriots had asked the Senecas to remain neutral in the colonists cause for independence. However, the British claimed their allegiance by promises of food, shelter, spirits, weapons, and clothing. In 1777 the British attempted to divide and conquer the rebellious Colonies by taking control of New York State. An expedition against the Indians was considered absolutely essential to the success of the Revolution. In March of 1779 General Sullivan accepted General Washington's offer to lead the main force of the expedition into the heart of the Seneca territory. The Genesee Valley was the western limit of the Sullivan Campaign. Little Beard's Town, located near Cuylerville, consisted of 128 houses most of which were described as large and elegant and surrounded by acres of cornfields, gardens, orchards, and vegetables of all kinds. The Army reached Little Beard's Town about sunset on September 14th and on September 15th destroyed the Village and the crops. It was estimated that 15,000 bushels of corn were destroyed. The Senecas fled westward mostly to Fort Niagara and they endured defeat, starvation, and homelessness. Sullivan's expedition opened the Genesee Country to settlers and word of the beauty and fertility of the Valley spread as far as western Europe. The men of Sullivan's Army never forgot the Valley and wished to return to build homes and mills.

In 1787 the western part of New York State was purchased from the State of Massachusetts by Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham.

Horatio Jones and John H. Jones had been soldiers in Sullivan's Army and settled in

Leicester in 1789. The first frame building in Leicester was a barn built by Capt. Horatio Jones in 1796.

The 1790 Census of Ontario County stated that the Indian Lands/Leicester contains four families and seventeen people. Within five years after the end of the Revolutionary War settlers began to arrive in the western frontier.

The 1797 Treaty of the Big Tree created Indian Reservations and opened the land west of the Genesee River for development. The earliest businesses were taverns or public houses and the first public house was built in 1797. Leicester had 16 taverns and as you can imagine they were very problematic, especially on the Sabbath!

In 1802 the Township was named Lester after the son of Oliver Leicester Phelps and in 1805 the spelling was corrected to Leicester. Leicester was the first Town west of the Genesee River where a permanent settlement was made. The settlement was located at the lower end of Jones Bridge Road and became a thriving hamlet known as Old Leicester.

The War of 1812 was declared in June of 1812 and began with a land invasion of Canada and ended on February 15th 1815 when the United States Senate ratified the Treaty of Ghent. The clear losers were the Native Americans, ravished by war and abandoned by the British, the tribes east of the Mississippi River could no longer resist American Expansion.

In August of 1814 Samuel Miles Hopkins was building a large public house in Old Leicester and due to a disagreement He then had surveyed and created the rival Village of Moscow on lands which he owned. He named the Village Moscow for reasons unknown. One possibility is that the biggest world news of 1812 was Napoleon's Grand Army invasion of Russia and the capture of Moscow. Another possibility is that it was very common to name villages, cities, and towns after those in the "old world". Samuel Miles Hopkins was a member of the Leicester Presbyterian Church.

The Moscow square was covered with a scattering of pine trees, white oak trees and a undergrowth of bushes. In 1814 the first building constructed in Moscow was a barn built by Jessie Waddams. He also built the first public house in the Village which still stands today beside this church and which many people know as the Starr House.

In 1815 the Reverend Daniel Butrick from the Presbyterian Synod of Geneva opened a school on Squakie Hill. He provided a building and Jerediah Horsford from Moscow was the teacher. The school had twenty pupils and the Senecas called him sha' go' zas da mi which translates as "He who teaches books". Jerediah Horsford was a member of the Leicester Presbyterian Church.

The Village of Moscow rapidly grew. A rough two roomed cabin became an Academy with perhaps twelve or fifteen male and female students. A low brick school room was built at the east end of the Village park and used as a meeting house on Sundays. By 1815 a blacksmith, a tavern, a store, a post office and a printing office made up the rest of the village. The Village also had a Doctor, a Lawyer, a Justice, a hatter, a tanner and shoemaker, a cabinet maker, a grocer, a stage proprietor, an inn keeper, and a cooper. In 1817 the Moscow Academy built a new three story frame building facing the Village Park. The Academy was almost the first school of academic grade in western New York and the students came from Buffalo, Canadagua and other regions. The first newspaper in Livingston County was the Genesee Farmer published at Moscow. The Moscow Presbyterian Church was organized in June of 1817 with nine members of five men and four women. The first Pastor was Reverend Elihu Manson. Services were held in the lecture room of the Academy. The pulpit was often filled by supply Pastors one of whom was Reverend Abraham Forman of Geneseo. The eccentricities of the Pastor were often the talk of the Town however, his ability and zeal crowded the room and it soon became necessary to use the whole lower floor of the Academy for worship. 1818 finds the Church under the care of the Presbytery of Ontario.

The signing of an Indian Treaty was held at Moscow Academy in 1820. A large number of Seneca Chiefs were present and Mary Jemison sold her Gardeau Reservation. In 1821 Livingston County was formed from parts of Genesee and Ontario Counties.

In 1832 this building was completed at a cost of \$3,300.00 a significant expense for that time. Since many of the earliest residents of the Town of Leicester and Village of Moscow settled here from New England the building style is reminiscent of New England Churches and the Park is typical of a New England Commons. This Church is the oldest church building in the Town that has been continuously used as a Presbyterian Church. For one hundred and eighty five years it has served as a place of worship and outreach to the community and the world, as well as a landmark. The church had grown from 30 members in 1829 to 73 members by 1834.

In 1835 the Congregation of 98 members split into two factions, the Old School (Orthodox) and the New School. The 59 members of the New School worshiped in this building and the 39 members of the Old School worshiped in a building next to the current Boces Service Center on the Parkway. A 1858 map of Moscow shows a Presbyterian Church structure however there are not any existing records to provide any further information.

In 1840 the Genesee Valley Canal opened for travel. In 1845 the two churches were reunited. In 1846 there were 84 members and by 1857 the Sunday School had an enrollment of 135 students.

The years prior to the Civil War found the Village growing and prospering. The Village was located on a heavily traveled route for western migration and people came to homestead and raise families here. Moscow became a center of business and trade. There were many public houses to serve the travelers and the farmers coming to ship grains and goods on the canal.

On June 18th 1861 a private relief agency was created by Federal Legislation to support sick and wounded soldiers of the Civil War. The Organization furnished supplies, medical services and religious literature to Union troops during the war. It supported Protestant Chaplains and Social Workers and collaborated with the U.S. Sanitary Commission to provide medical services. From October to December 1864 the Moscow Presbyterian Church contributed \$37.02 to the relief effort. Charity and support was a mission priority.

After the Civil War the Country once again prospered and consequently church attendance and a renewal of spirituality flourished. Missionary Societies were organized to spread the Gospel throughout the world. The Moscow Presbyterian Church participated by providing money and members to serve as missionaries to Turkey, Japan, and Egypt. Support for missionaries has continued to be a priority of this Church.

In 1874 the Reverend Fisher Gutelius became Pastor and served until his death in 1906. Reverend Gutelius was a civil war veteran. Under his care the Church grew and flourished. The membership increased to 104 members and the Sunday School had 185 pupils. He inspired courage and the desire to lead a pure life. His influence on the young resulted in a great number of men from Moscow entering college.

In 1882 the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad laid a rail bed through the center of the Village. The coming of the Railroad created new business opportunities for freight and passenger services. A building boom followed, warehouses, grain elevators, a railroad depot, a water tower for the steam trains and a very large brick railroad building were erected. Members of this Church were among the Village business leaders.

On Sunday June 17th 1900 tragedy struck the Village. A cinder from the steam train landed on the roof of a Warehouse occupied by Thompson and Wooster and within two hours the entire business district as well as homes were destroyed. As a result of the fire 40 people were without shelter and the only building remaining was the railroad brick building and the mill and lumberyard owned by B.E. Brophel. Estimates of the loss was placed between \$75,000.00 and \$100,00.00. The Town and Village Hall was destroyed and all the records were lost. Most of the businesses carried little or no insurance and some business owners were financially ruined.

By the fall of 1900 the business section was being reborn and several buildings were

nearing completion. On July 16th 1907 the Village of Moscow was officially incorporated by public election.

In September 1911 the Civil War monument was dedicated and located in the Park. The monument committee had solicited donations to pay for the monument and planned the events. Some of the members of this church served as Committee members. Between 3,000 and 4,000 people attended the dedication and the afternoon exercises were held at this Church.

World War I began in Europe in 1914 and lasted until 1918. The United States entered the War in 1917 when the War was at a bloody stalemate. The decision was unpopular and to say the least, the Army was ill equipped. Everything became geared to the War effort and the citizens and the communities had to make sacrifices. New building construction was not allowed, rationing occurred and War Bonds were sold to finance the War.

In 1917 the Church had 122 members. Letters written home from local soldiers tell of receiving hams, cakes, jellies, produce, quilts, socks and other items from members of this Church. In March of 1917 the Village name was changed. There are not any recorded reasons or public opinions about why this occurred. There seemed to be little controversy about this issue. At the General Election held on March 20th 1917 a total of 46 votes were cast; 32 for, 12 against, 2 blank and the Village name became Leicester. One possibility is to distance themselves from an unpopular war and the events in Russia at that time. However, a more practical reason may be that another Moscow was located on the rail line and the railroad wished to eliminate confusion.

In the summer of 1918 the Spanish Flu Epidemic began and lasted for a year. The Flu also had a deadly strain of pneumonia and 1 in 3 people in Livingston County died. The Village of Leicester closed all places of amusement, public meeting places, clubs, schools, and other organizations except for meetings of the Red Cross and regular church services until November 1st 1919 when the closing order was revoked.

In 1919 the Methodist Church joined the Presbyterian Church and the Church name became Union Presbyterian Church. The Manse was built in 1920 and fulfilled a long held desire of the Church.

The years passed and the Church continued to prosper. The period after WW II was an unpressed period of growth and prosperity in the Country. In June of 1962 the Church membership was 160 people, services were well attended and the youth were actively involved in the Church. In 1967 the Church property behind the building was made into a Community Park and playground by the York/Leicester Kiwanis.

On March 16th 2015 the United Presbyterian Church was reincorporated as the Leicester Evangelical Presbyterian Church and is a member of the Presbytery of the Alleghenies.

Through out the years this building has undergone redecoration, renovation, and needed improvements. The commitment of this Church to God, Country, and Community has remained constant for 200 years. Members have served their Country in times of war and peace. Countless members have served as Community leaders and decision makers. They have served on Village Boards, Town Boards, as Mayors, as Town Supervisors, as County and State Officials and in other public offices.

Outreach to support people in need in the Community and the world have been numerous and varied. For example, in 1986 a severe drought affected Southern farmers. The Church organized a community wide fund drive to provide food and necessities to the Southern farmers families. Around 1952-1953 a County Organization called L.O.R.Y (Livingston Older Rural Youth Group) was sponsored by this Church and the meetings were held here. Appreciation breakfasts are held yearly for any Emergency Responders.

The pioneers, inventors, abolitionists, businessmen, and educators from this congregation have influenced both the physical appearance of their community as well as supported social causes. Many of the Organizations such as, Kiwanis, the Masonic Order, Fire Departments, and youth organizations have been developed and supported by members of this Church.

Our world is vastly different from the past. Communities and families are fragmented and traditional commitments to Churches and Communities are lacking or non-existent. There are many challenges facing the Church of today. However, through out history it is the challenges of the past that shape the future and for over 200 years this Church has a history of meeting and persevering through any challenge.